BOUNTIES

Last winter, a private wildlife club in southeastern North Dakota began offering a bounty on coyotes. The price was $25 a head and, according to a news story released by the Associated Press, within a couple of weeks the group paid out all $2,100 it had allocated for bounties.

The story made news because it had been many years since bounties for coyotes were paid in North Dakota. While a few hunters and landowners occasionally still wonder why bounties aren't used as a possible incentive to reduce predator populations in certain situations, the state has not sponsored any bounties on coyotes or fox since 1961. And it took 10 years or so preceding that for North Dakota citizens to convince the state legislature that bounties were not a good investment of hunting license dollars.

And yet, this local organization, acting on sincere concern for lower game bird and deer populations, felt that offering a bounty or reward would reduce coyote numbers, and therefore reduce predation on local deer and birds.

North Dakota Bounty Background

In 1881, before North Dakota became a state, territorial law allowed county commissioners to pay a bounty on wolves. State law in 1890 required county commissioners to pay a bounty on wolves if 50 stock-raisers petitioned for it.

State funds were first used to pay bounties in 1897 – $3 for each wolf. It wasn't long before coyotes joined the mix and through 1947 coyote and wolf bounties ranged from $1.50 to $5 for adults and $1 to $2.50 for pups.

Also during this time bounties were authorized for magpies, rattlesnakes, skunks, gophers, rabbits, crows and possibly other wildlife. Red fox and bobcats were added to the list in the 1940s.

By 1961, when the state legislature stopped authorizing bounties, North Dakota hunters and taxpayers had footed the bill for more than $2.2 million in bounty payments.

There's no question that bounties will, at least in the short-term, stimulate interest in taking predators. From April 1, 1945 to March 31, 1946, the first full year a bounty was paid on adult red foxes, hunters turned in nearly 25,000 adults and pups to county auditors. While the number of fox turned in for payment went down over the next several years, by 1955 the take was back up to nearly 30,000 fox, and in 1959 48,000 were turned in. During that period the state paid out more than $500,000 dollars in fox bounties, yet the fox population apparently went up.

Coyotes, on the other hand, became fewer in number after 1945, when there was a bounty. This was during a time when poisoning and hunting from airplanes was legal. Some people, especially plane-hunters, were highly skilled at killing coyotes, and poisons were very effective.

The downside is that the reduced coyote population was likely a primary reason the fox population started to escalate in the early 1950s, creating a far worse problem for ground-nesting birds.

In nature, the largest canine predator on the landscape works hard to keep the next in line out of the territory. When the wolf was dominant, North Dakota didn't have many coyotes. When the wolf was eliminated, coyotes began to thrive. At the time the coyote population was likely at its lowest, in the mid-1950s, the fox population was on its way up and spreading into new areas, including southwestern North Dakota where foxes had never existed prior to 1940.

This swing in predator population dynamics may have created an unintended dilemma. Foxes are much more significant predators of game birds and nests than are coyotes. When one coyote family is taken out, several fox families can move in, greatly increasing nest predation in that area.

Then again, in the 1950s wildlife biologists were just starting to learn about relationships between predators, and the consequences of certain actions weren't always clear. Later, Game and Fish research indicated the coyote population would have to be reduced by 50 percent for any long-term, noticeable benefits. For fox, the reduction would have to be closer to 67 percent.

With evidence that coyote and fox populations were both climbing in the late 1950s, despite years of bounties and the total payout nearing $2 million, North Dakota hunters and landowners were still overwhelmingly in favor of paying out money for fox, coyote and several other kinds of animals. In a large survey of hunters and farmers, both groups favored a bounty system by a 2-to-1 margin.

A few years later, however, the legislature stopped state sponsored bounty payments.

If the Game and Fish Department were to take a similar survey today, it might still find a fair number of people who support some kind of bounty system. After all, the overall objective of such a system – reducing a predator population – isn't out of line. What looks good on paper, however, has seldom held true in practice, and it doesn't matter if the payment comes from license dollars, or contributions from private groups.

Here's a look at some of the justifications and rationalizations that may arise when bounties are discussed … From Both Sides.

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FROM BOTH SIDES

One Side

• Bounties create interest in hunting by people who would not otherwise pursue that species. That interest can stay with a hunter when bounties are no longer offered.

• Bounties can reduce predator numbers in local areas.

• Bounties for predators like fox and coyote encourage hunting and trapping when fur prices are low.

• Game animals and birds need additional protection from predators.

The Other Side

• Bounties do not succeed in reducing predator populations on a large scale over a long period of time.

• Bounties encourage fraud and cheating in presenting animals for payment. For instance, people collecting bounties on animals taken in other states or out of the intended area.

• Bounties wind up paying for many animals that would have been killed anyway, such as the trapper or hunter's normal take, and road kills.

• Money spent on bounties, either by the state or private organizations, could be better spent establishing or maintaining habitat for game species.

• Bounties don't target specific animals that are causing problems for farmers. These animals are best dealt with by professional trappers (who could then submit the animal for a bounty payment, even though they were already being paid for their services).

• Bounties designed to eliminate top-level predators will encourage replacement by the next in line. For instance, if a township has several coyote families, it would likely not have many fox. If you removed all the coyotes, red fox would soon inhabit all available areas, and they are much harder on ground-nesting birds than are coyotes.

• Bounties encourage a "kill at all costs" attitude among a few people who think that because an animal is worth money, laws can justifiably be broken (running with snowmobiles, trespassing) in the name of reducing their population. Any good these people do in taking animals is negated by the bad publicity they bring on people who hunt legally and ethically.

• To control or reduce a population long-term it would be necessary to take many animals even after they appeared to be very scarce, a point at which most people would give up because the bounty wouldn't begin to pay for the effort.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.